

METHODS

War and peace in the critical treatises by Erasmus of Rotterdam: an *explication du texte*

Albrecht Classen*

Department of German Studies, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, United States

***Correspondence:**Albrecht Classen,
aclassen@arizona.edu**Received:** 21 June 2023; **Accepted:** 17 July 2023; **Published:** 27 July 2023

In the face of ever-ongoing war activities all over the world throughout time, such as in Ukraine as a victim of Russian aggression since February 24, 2022, it behooves us to explore parts of the historical discourse on war and peace once again as we are all directly impacted by it in ideological, religious, emotional, political, and material-economic terms. One of the most important spokespersons for peace in the pre-modern world was the Humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, who had major insights to proffer that are relevant to us as well. This article examines some of his concepts through a close reading of several of his treatises and endeavors to highlight their relevance for us today and even beyond the traditional academic discourse. This study is embedded in a wider context concerning dictatorship, hypocrisy of Christians, virtues and vices, and ethics as discussed in early-sixteenth-century Humanist circles, but it is really dedicated to the timeless question of what war means in practical terms, why peace is so precious, and also why it is so tenuous in light of shortcomings of the entire humankind.

Keywords: war and peace, war in Ukraine 2022, Erasmus of Rotterdam, humanism

Introduction: the history of war and the situation today

We live, whether we like it or not, in an ominous time following World War I and World War II. We have also gone through the trauma of the Cold War and simultaneously the Vietnam War. Unfortunately, if not tragically, this has not meant that humanity would have stopped resorting to military means to engage with each other. The number of people killed in military operations during the last 110 years and more is just staggering. Now, the Russian attack against Ukraine that started on February 24, 2022, has ripped apart all illusions that war would no longer be a real threat in Europe as a result of the existence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. As many critics have observed, the war against Ukraine was not legitimate and had nothing to do with an alleged expansion of NATO directly toward the border with Russia. Instead, due to the Russian military operation, NATO has bonded much more strongly and has actually

expanded since then, with Finland joining in 2023, soon to be followed by Sweden after Turkey's objections will have been removed. It is a war directly affecting Western Europe if not the entire Western world which has so far virtually unanimously supported Ukraine with weapons, money, and many other materials.

In many speeches, President Putin explicitly evoked the "glory" of the Soviet Union and the Czarist empire and lambasted the neighboring country, thus justifying the military operation. Similarly, many other wars have been launched in the past all over the world with the aggressor claiming fleeting and hypothetical claims on the target country/people.

Even though the threat of the nuclear apocalypse seemed to be over since the end of the Cold War (ca. 1990), the current situation might be worse than ever before because technological sophistication has lowered dramatically the threshold toward the employment of those nuclear weapons. North Korea is working aggressively toward the goal of building up its military and gaining the status of a political powerhouse that might be able to threaten even

the United States. And wars are taking place on a regular basis in many parts of the world all the time, either for religious reasons (genocide in Burundi, ISIS, Taliban, Al Qaeda, Hindus vs. Muslims in India, Catholics vs. Protestants in Northern Ireland, and so on) or out of greed, perverted nationalism (refer to the Kosovo War, 1998–1999), or political ideology (West vs. East). There are serious reasons to fear that China might try to attack and take over Taiwan as an island nation that allegedly belongs to the so-called “fatherland,” which would represent a huge military threat also to the West. Israel continues to be surrounded by Arab enemies, while the Palestinians fear the Israeli war machine, and Iran and Saudi Arabia are sable-rattling all the time, while the latter are engaged in a bloody war with Yemen. The African continent is tragically plagued with many wars, and we can also identify numerous conflicts in South and Central America [(1); for practical lists of the many different wars, see online at].¹

So, altogether, war is unfortunately a very common phenomenon in our times, if not in all times. In earlier periods, wars took place very regularly as well, and it would be most difficult to determine even one year or at least some months in world history during which no military actions took place somewhere on the globe [(2–4); for a list of wars from B.C.E. to the twenty-first century, see online at² both accessed 18 July, 2023]. Some of the most insightful psychological observations and analyses of war serving nationalistic purposes supporting a charismatic leader with the entire people being submissive like lambs ready to be sacrificed have been offered by psychologist Richard A. Koehnberg. However, as his books have not appeared with standard scholarly presses, the scholarly community, especially historians, so it seems, has not yet fully acknowledged his arguments (5–9). War itself is one of the most intensively studied phenomena, but humanity at large does not seem to learn anything about its own past and continues with these forms of military aggression. The production of weapons, now also of weapons of mass destruction, proves to be one of the most effective ways of making money, and there is no chance in the world that the military-industrial complex will ever decline or even disappear (10).

Just war?

The ethics of war constitutes a highly controversial issue, considering the long tradition of the just-war debate from antiquity to the present. When would a person, a group, a

people, or a nation be entitled to resort to arms when there is allegedly a legitimate reason to do so, such as when an attack might occur from the outside? The idea of the just war can be traced to the earliest history of the Western world (Confucius, Augustine, the anonymous author of the Indian *Mahabharata*, Thomas Aquinas, Francisco de Vitoria, Stanislaw of Skarbimierz, and so on) (11, 12). Thus, the idea of self-defense under any circumstances is deeply ingrained in our thinking and physical makeup, but for a long time, already society has taken serious measures to limit the use of weapons for whatever reason, deferring that legitimization and power to official institutions, such as the knightly class in the Middle Ages, the Samurai in Japan, the police and military in the modern era. Then, there are legal courts, governments, law books, and many other entities that serve to concentrate physical power in superstructures to avoid the constant conflict between individuals.

The issue also entails the question of what constitutes a crime, either on an individual level or on the level of nations. Were the Russians under President Putin, for instance, entitled to attempt to take over or destroy Ukraine in 2022? Is the West justified in arming the victimized country and offering much logistical and other support against the Russians? Where is the just cause for either side in this horrible conflict?

Many people nobly clamor for peace, even in neighboring countries such as Germany, but what kind of peace could be expected for the Ukrainians if they were to lay down their weapons in the face of the invading Russian army? Are not the Ukrainian efforts to protect its civil population from bombing, air raids, mass murder, rape, and abduction of thousands of children completely justified? Virtually all leaders in the Western world support that notion, although there are also many people who denounce Ukraine for rather nebulous reasons possibly fed by Russian ideological campaigns (13–15).

During the second half of the twentieth century, various attempts were made by the Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, and East Germans to rise up against the Russian occupiers, here not counting the rebellions within the Soviet Union, but they were all brutally crushed, and the people had to pay not only a high blood toll but then also faced even further Russian repressions in the name of socialism. Who would not want peace, to repeat myself, but what kind of peace would it be if it were established at the cost of complete subjugation, rape, murder, and imprisonment of all the leaders and intellectuals? (16–19).

The issue of “peace” was of central concern at the 2023 Synod of the German Protestant Church Meeting in Nuremberg, June 7–11 (Evangelischer Kirchentag; accessed 18 July, 2023)³. Both the former German President Joachim Gauck (2012–2017) and the German Secretary of Foreign

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_conflicts_in_Africa; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_conflicts_in_Asia; and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_conflicts_in_South_America

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/list-of-wars-2031197>; or https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lists_of_wars

³ <https://www.evangelische-friedensarbeit.de/>

Affairs, Annalena Baerbock (2021–), agreed during a podium discussion that peace is, of course, a high value, but that military aggression is to be condemned entirely (session “Werte, Ethik, Interessen”).⁴ As Gauck stated, for a Christian, it would be obligatory to assist victims of violence, whereas absolute pacifism would amount to a support of the aggressor and an escape into spiritual illusion. Baerbock emphasized that the lack of action in the case of Ukraine would amount to a crime against all international laws and human rights.

As much as the peace movement mattered deeply, especially during the Cold War, and also today, of course, it would be highly naive now in the face of open Russian military aggression to preach a peace created by abandoning all efforts of self-defense. Tolerance, to use a parallel case, is a highly praised ideal, but it cannot be tolerant in the face of absolute, radical, and deadly intolerance (20, 21).

Erasmus of Rotterdam: a humanist speaks out

The purpose of my essay cannot be to study war itself once again or to engage in a political debate, especially regarding the war in Ukraine. Also, I do not intend to examine the meaning of peace in its historical and literary context either (22, 23). Instead, I want to turn our attention once again to one of the most outspoken and intellectual proponents of peace in the early modern period, the Humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam (ca. 1466–1536) (24–27). Maybe because he lived at a major turning point of human history, still steeped in the Middle Ages and yet already with both feet in the sixteenth century, i.e., the early modern age, he laid the foundations for many new intellectual developments and was, indirectly, even responsible, or at least inspirational, for the Protestant Reformation because he made available in modern print the New Testament in its original Greek text [(28); Koppe; see also the valuable contributions to (29); online at; accessed on 18 July, 2023].⁵

His insightful comments regarding war and peace promise to shed important light on the discourse itself and to inform us meaningfully about how we can engage with these issues today under the current conditions, which are, tragically, universal and continue to vex humankind. To be sure, Erasmus of Rotterdam is one of the best-known early modern intellectuals, and there is a legion of research on his works, including his reflections on war and peace. However, we face currently yet another disastrous war situation in Ukraine, and hence the fundamental question of how to cope with the issue of military aggression, especially when it threatens the existence of an entire people, confronts us once again. What is war, why is there war, and why do we not

automatically subscribe to peace since we are all part of one large family, humanity? In short, Erasmus’s writings allow us to probe once again fundamental issues underlying this almost timeless discourse and to rediscover the ethics behind the drive toward banning war and establishing peace.

Oratio de pace et discordia

As Erasmus commented in his treatise *Oratio de Pace et discordia*, a work from his early years (ca. 1489), nothing would be more favorable and pleasant in human life than peace and mutual love. By the same token, there would be nothing worse for the human spirit than hatred and discord [(30), 85; I will comment on the writer’s statements and highlight primarily his critical concepts as they prove relevant for us today. This has the advantage for our purpose here that I can conceptualize and analyze his ideas more in detail, instead of paraphrasing and quoting his work at length. Only when I quote directly, I will offer immediately my own English translation. See also the valuable contributions to (29); online at: see text footnote 5; accessed on 18 July, 2023]. While virtually all animals possess some weapons or armor to defend themselves in the wild nature, human beings are not equipped with anything like that and hence should be particularly qualified for pursuing love and peace. In fact, as Erasmus notes, the seeds of peace are planted in us as our nature drives us to pursue sociability, embrace friends and family members, and love a marriage partner or children. Human beings tend to empathize with the suffering of others, as tragic occurrences drive us to shed tears over the suffering even of strangers (86).

Erasmus might not only have been too naive to understand the truly aggressive human nature in psychological terms that we are familiar with today, but he might have also been deeply correct in pointing out that the human creature is endowed with a spirit that desires friendship, community, and love, hence peace. The evils in this world are, according to his opinion, greed, and ambition that misdirected us away from our true nature (86). Money, as we would say today, emerges as the key component in bringing forth inhumanity and disloyalty among people. In essence, then, Erasmus here recapitulates the concept of the Seven Deadly Sins as developed within the Catholic Church since the fourth and fifth centuries (Evagrius Ponticus and John Cassian) (31).

While all animals observe a mutual peace among themselves within their own species, people constantly commit treason, are guilty of injustice, and harm other people (87). Whereas wild animals prove to be dangerous to other creatures, hence also to people, the latter reveal a most horrible character that would not even shy away from cannibalism, as a story from antiquity indicates (87–88). All of humankind finds itself, as Erasmus laments bitterly, in a crazy riot, an uproar of the worst kind, aiming at the complete destruction of the others, whoever they might be. Unlimited

⁴ <https://www.kirchentag.de/digital>

⁵ <https://refubium.fu-berlin.de/handle/fub188/35223>

greed makes people totally voracious and blind to what creates real happiness (88). This military thinking, however, could only lead to the complete destruction of all humankind.

In a classical *laudatio temporis acti*, Erasmus contrasts the idyll in which people used to live in the past—probably an idyllic misconception of human history—with the chaos of the present time when people enjoy a much higher degree of material fortune and yet do not find any peace and security. Society has turned over to bestial wilderness, with individuals constantly eager to kill others (89). The author observes to his great dismay the rule of chaos among people, whereas both nature here on earth and in the outer space would be determined by the cosmos, or harmony, without which nothing could exist (89).

Erasmus invites his audience to consider, as an example, the harmonious cooperation of all body parts that makes our living possible first of all. Only unity and community facilitate the achievement of happiness, just as the body can function only when all organs and other parts carry out their function. However, neither the eyes see for themselves nor do the hands work for themselves. When the mouth would stop eating, all other body parts would starve to death. Even a short moment of disharmony negatively affects our health and does threaten death to come to us (92). In fact, all elements of the (human) body exist only for the proper working of the whole, and when one organ begins to suffer, then all others would suffer as well (92).

In horror, Erasmus voices his great astonishment that people all over the world hate, rob, plunder, and butcher each other, although we are all limbs of the same body (92). Discord hence destroys humanity, leads to hatred and violence, and thus creates wars, which he identifies as the death knell for peaceful existence. In fact, disagreements and bickering introduce major conflicts and destroy all of our virtues (93). Without peace, there cannot be true virtues, but hypocrisy and deception can be found everywhere, especially among monks and other clerics (93).

Erasmus moves, of course, from the specifics of war and peace to the general aspects of virtues and harmony, intertwining both dimensions in an intriguing fashion. As everyone is involved in social interactions, the pursuit of true virtues would hence represent the first essential step toward a more peaceful engagement with one's human fellows, neighbors, and citizens. The absence of inner virtues would hence make room for vices to enter, such as greed and anger, which then could easily explode into hostility and aggression and hence war in very concrete terms. One could pretend to be in possession of virtue, but true virtue without peace would not be possible. Hence, for Erasmus, the entire discussion about human aggression ultimately comes down to the issue of peace without which virtue cannot be lived out.

Even when a person commanded many different virtues, the lack of self-control, the display of discord, or disharmony, or war, would destroy them all. Disagreement and rancor result in the entire panoply of vices, which in turn would

bring about hostility. Only those who would subscribe to the ideal of an open-minded individual who would be strong enough to listen to and accept, if reasonable, criticism, could be identified as truly virtuous and peace-loving. Disharmony converts, as Erasmus emphasizes, everything into bitterness, so even the most fortunate tyrants would live an unhappier life than ordinary entertainers (94–95).

Practical experiences would easily confirm that peace and harmony would promote personal happiness in both spiritual and material terms, whereas disharmony would always in the end lead to the loss of all wealth. Disagreement would impoverish a married couple caught in constant fighting, and disagreement brought down even the most powerful cities and nations, such as Troy or Carthage. Filled with sadness, Erasmus then also refers to his contemporaries and their own nation where the material conditions necessary for happiness to rule would be more than sufficient. However, bickering, in-fighting, and rivalries would always destroy even the most powerful people or nation (95). The author concludes with comments filled with horror about the self-destructive tendency with which people pursue disagreements and thus hurt themselves to the point of death through war. Conflicts and hostility would represent the worst features in human existence as they eliminate all virtues and bring about war and violence (97–98). In a way, we might hence call Erasmus a utopianist and harbored very specific ideals not commonly shared by the religious leaders of his time (both Luther and the Catholics), but certainly attractive for the intellectuals at large, as the large publication success of his works confirms (32, 33).

Dulce bellum inexpertis

One of the most famous anti-war treatises composed by Erasmus was his *Dulce bellum inexpertis* contained as no. 3001 in his *Adagia*, first published in 1508, republished in 1515, published as a separate printing in 1517, and many times thereafter until 1536, and then also in translations (34). According to WorldCat, the text exists in many languages today, but not in Chinese or in Russian, which might be indicative of Erasmus's revolutionary insights that conflict with the political regimes in those respective countries. Obviously, hence, his loud voice against war was heard far and wide and also greatly respected, although this did not mean at all that military operations would have been reduced or stopped in sixteenth-century Europe. As Erasmus openly admits, he culled the title directly from the classical author on war, Vegetius (Book III, ch. 14 of his *Epitoma rei militaris*, late fourth century C.E.). In essence, the proverb implies that only those who do not know first-hand the concrete conditions of war would welcome it, whereas the war propaganda back home would paint a rosy picture of glory, honor, and triumph. The same situation was fully at play shortly before the outbreak of WWI all over Europe, against which later

many authors protested or warned about, as Erich Maria Remarque's novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* from 1929 (All Quiet on the Western Front) and Edward Berger's movie with the same title and based on Remarque's work from 2022 indicate [(35, 36); for the movie, see the very informative website; 18 July, 2023].⁶

There would be nothing worse, more condemnable, or devastating than war, and yet, as he notes, people launch military operations with no hesitation and without any legitimate reason, diving into the most barbaric and cruel operations against an assumed enemy (182). Erasmus feels deeply troubled that wars are provoked not only by young and inexperienced people. Instead, both members of the Church and princes, old and well-established leaders, promote war, although it would be their primary task to govern the irrational masses and run their countries with reason and wisdom (182). However, as he observes, already then, warfare has become an ordinary operation everyone accepts as normal business. Yet, human beings had been created by God to live a life of harmony and peacefulness (183), a topic here resumed from the previous treatise, but certainly worthy of being repeated many times. Of all creatures, only people are born completely naked and helpless, totally dependent on the help of others, that is, dependent on gratitude and friendship (184).

Nature granted them the power of language, the expression of joy through laughter, the feeling of sorrow as demonstrated through tears, and a friendly appearance. So, as people are social beings, they can experience happiness and meaning only through their companionship. The Humanist speaks through Erasmus when he emphasizes, above all, that nothing can bond the souls together better than a social community, especially in the context of learning (185). Helping others brings about love and friendship, both key components that make human life worth living, especially as people are God's creatures (185).

War, on the other hand, throws the individual into a rage engulfing the masses and destroys all threads of humanity so that, under certain circumstances, even brothers and friends fight and kill each other (186). Erasmus paints a horrifying picture of the result of war, that is, violence, death, destruction, rape, slavery, the loss of family members and friends, poverty, and global sorrow, with plenty of widows and orphans. Even a seemingly just war—certainly a concept much discussed throughout times; even Russian President Putin tried to legitimize his war against Ukraine somehow along those lines, as perverted and absurd as that argument might be—did not end in any other way since the outcome for both sides would be the same, the elimination of everything people hold dear and love, if they are not all killed. The notion of the “just war” has been discussed since antiquity, and it continues to constitute a deep conundrum until today [May with the assistance of (37)].

Once war has broken out, the worst crimes and sins come forth, such as utter disrespect of piety, lacking respect for the law, and the readiness to commit any kind of crime (197). War allows the worst individuals to operate openly and without any fear of repercussions for their evil deeds, harming society at large. War is never limited in spatial terms and quickly spreads out in all directions (197). Even the tiniest military conflict would quickly explode into a large war.

Animals would never wage a war against members of their own species, and when they fight, then because of hunger, fear, or worry for their little ones (189). People, by contrast, are incited to war because of the most ridiculous reasons, such as claiming territory from neighbors, out of childish wrath, or because someone has kidnapped a wife (189).

People have resorted to military means throughout time and have caused endless suffering all over the world, destroying thereby all sense of humanity. Erasmus probably thinks here of Paris having abducted Agamemnon's wife Helena, which then led to the Trojan War according to Homer's account. It would be entirely wrong to assume that Erasmus would have condoned this criminal treatment of women. Instead, he only suggests that all conditions for war would have to be considered in proportionate, relative terms. The topic of revenge plays a huge role in this context, especially when it gets out of hands. This was later discussed quite powerfully by the German author Heinrich von Kleist in his famous legal and political novella *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810) and by the Swiss poet Gottfried Keller in his ballad “Füße im Feuer” (1882). Already during the high Middle Ages, the problematic nature of revenge was intensively discussed, such as in the various Old Norse Icelandic Sagas and in the Middle High German heroic epic, *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200). At issue here is the question to what extent personal injury can be considered sufficient as a basis for a war involving an entire people or a group of individuals.

Erasmus then attempts to write a whole history of humankind, from ancient times to the present, all perceived through the lens of the development of weapons and fighting, first against wild animals and later against people. In the course of time, as he observes, the desire for military conquest grew, and this then led to the situation of war in the early modern period. The author concludes that ultimately war is nothing but a mass murder and pillaging and hence a crime against humanity (197). War is a form of insanity, and to Erasmus, it seems as if everything in life circles around nothing else but this insane operation. Most horribly, as he notes, war is waged even within the family, pitting a father against his son, for instance—a parallel case of that was already discussed in the early ninth-century Old High German “Hildebrandslied” (38)—and a Christian against another Christian (198). Almost ironically, Erasmus then addresses a universal concern with war propaganda which glorifies all the military operations, promoted by both

⁶ [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Im_Westen_nichts_Neues_\(2022\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Im_Westen_nichts_Neues_(2022))

members of the Church and politicians or courtiers, falsely promising a certain, if not guaranteed victory (198).

Grotesquely, even God is invoked by some as an assured helper for the war-mongering party, a phenomenon that has been around from the earliest time and continues to be practiced until the present, although the abstract power is sometimes replaced by the idea of the nation, the fatherland, socialism, freedom, or one's independence. Erasmus, to be sure, severely attacks monks, theologians, bishops, and other clerics for misusing the name of God for their military ideology (198). Christ Himself is regularly evoked as the supporter of the "just" cause (199) although he has nothing to do with war.

By contrast, both friendship and peace can achieve so much in creating individual and collective happiness and commonwealth. War, however, destroys everything that people have built over centuries and kills massive numbers of innocent people—certainly a universal observation, as tragic as it certainly proves to be (39). As a consequence of war, justice is abandoned, people mock at humanity, faith is derided, and the youth lose all of their virtues, knowledge, and scholarship no longer count anything (201). In other words, as Erasmus emphasizes, all those who call for war have lost their sense of God and no longer fear Him (202). In short, he identifies war as a major event in which virtually all sides have to go through massive suffering, even the victors (203). Whereas peace would profit everyone, war would be of advantage only for a small group, those who win over the other side and profit from this success in personal terms, but Erasmus questions even that outcome as completely negative as no war party would ever have had to accept much suffering as well (204).

On the one hand, there would be a heavy toll in human lives, and on the other, there would be enormous material losses and costs, as the current situation at the eastern front of Ukraine in its war against Russia dramatically illustrates once again. Not only would the ordinary soldiers have to accept extreme physical suffering, and also their own death, but society at large would have to sacrifice infinite amounts of money to carry out a war campaign. Peace, on the other hand, would certainly prove to be much more economical and beneficial than war (204).

Altogether, Erasmus cannot help but identify war as the result of pure insanity, ignorance, wrath, ambition, greed, and brutality (206). Even Christians would raise weapons against other Christians, which would actually have to be properly called fratricide. However, as he alerts his readers, Christ had taught in essence the one fundamental lesson, to love one's neighbor, which ought to prevent all wars at least within Christendom (207) [(40), 93–104]. Erasmus was not at all a full supporter of Luther and the Protestant Reformation because he hoped instead for peace and harmony between the two sides in that religious struggle. In fact, he discussed many times practically ways in which good Christians

should pray to God for harmony and peace among all their fellow religionists.

Yet, he also felt deep frustration and helplessness in the face of endless, actually spiraling violence as a result of the growing criticism against the traditional, Catholic Church [(41), 261–72; (42), chapter XV, 13–44]. Just as in the present time, Erasmus raised his voice against violence, aggression, hostility, and ultimately against all wars, trying to appeal to his audiences that war would have to be identified as the most detrimental mode of action in all of human life. If Christians were actively pursuing war, they would betray the fundamental teachings of Christ, consisting of an absolute commitment to peace (207). Little wonder that Erasmus hence placed himself between all chairs, admired by many, but hated both by Lutherans and Catholics. Forcefully, he points out the consistent messages in the New Testament that all speak in the name of and for peace, and this at nearly all costs. Scathingly, the author uncovers the ghastly hypocrisy of all those who resort to the prayer "Pater noster" (Lord's Prayer) with its critical statement that "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Anyone, however, who promotes war would act in contradiction to this foundational statement and pursue his/her own will against all other people.

Erasmus's horror pertained particularly to the Christian society where every feature confirmed the prevalence of hypocrisy, violence, arrogance, tyranny, conflicts, and war (210). Subsequently, he engages with the Aristotelian teachings that contrast negatively with the true Christian teachings, which would not concern us here as the author engages with a scholarly argument characteristic of his own time. What is relevant, however, consists of Erasmus's insistence that, for Christians, the only truth could be found in the original text of the New Testament, free of all scholastic teachings and theological dogma (211). The author also sharply criticizes Christians above all for being involved in the worst type of warfare against each other, whereas members of other religions could not be blamed for such behavior (212–13). Those have worked hard to avoid war by means of peace treatises or by their leaders stepping down from their offices (213), whereas the Christians are only pseudo-Christians (213). Erasmus then turns to a general jeremiad against his Christian contemporaries whom he charges with murder, crimes of all sorts, lust for killing, betrayal, and so forth, whereas the heathens—he probably had the Ottoman Turks in mind—demonstrated morally upright, ethical behavior in both private and public (213–14). Many other contemporaries held a similar view, admiring the Turks, for instance, for their high level of civilization, although they then condemned them as well for their Muslim faith; see, for instance, Georg of Hungary, a former slave [see (43, 44)].

Examining the example provided by Christ as related in the New Testament, with Peter defending his master with a sword and with Christ then banning the use of all weapons (Matthew 26:52), Erasmus pursues a radical concept of peace

or anti-war concept, rejecting all forms of weapons and use of violence (for broader ethical discussions today, see, for instance, both accessed 18 July, 2023; see also (45, 46)).⁷ Undoubtedly, the author is fully aware of the enormous complexity of the issue at stake here, raising the question whether a just war would be legitimate (if led by the ruler), whether clerics could be involved in a just war, and whether Christ would have ever tolerated the use of weapons (218–19). Aiming for a compromise, Erasmus finally concludes that a truly Christian teacher would never approve of war unless there might be mitigating circumstances that would force him to accept it after all, yet then only with regret and ruefulness (219). He does not deny that natural law would justify self-defense against acts of violence, but he insists that Christ's lessons regarding peacefulness would still be preferable (219). This would entail, for instance, that we would pray for mercy even for those who would commit evil acts against us.

In conservative and fundamentally Christian terms, closely following the text of the New Testament, Erasmus underscores that only those could be considered rich and powerful who do not strive for wealth and influence here in this world but always think of the afterlife (220). Those who struggle to accumulate money only aim for the preservation of life on earth, whereas others would believe in the true value of eternal life. Even though a number of popes and famous theologians had promoted war for the Christian cause (Crusades), he rejects them all and strongly urges his readers to pay attention only to what Christ Himself had stated as reported in the Gospels (220).

The execution of a criminal, condemned to death by a legal court, could not be equated with a war fought by one people against another since there would not be any arbiter and hence no fair judgment. In any case, as Erasmus then alerts us once again, in every war, the real victims are innocent civilians, such as farmers, old people, women, orphans, and girls (221). A war would normally only serve some individuals, profiting from the military operations for their own interests. Hence, which might sound a bit provocative, it would be better not to persecute an individual or even a group of people by military means than to launch an entire war in which thousands would certainly die (222). A ruler, such as a king, would have to keep in mind that his power was invested in him by the people, and the latter could withdraw that as well, especially when wars are fought over territorial claims, or demands that taxes are paid by various groups of people to this or that lord (222) [here is yet another valuable example of a political concept already extant in the pre-modern era suggesting that the king does not hold absolute power and could be impeached, for instance, if the situation would lend itself to that process; see (47), 43].

In essence, wars are waged, according to Erasmus, because the leaders of individual peoples pursue personal interests and make everyone else suffer from the devastating consequences. However, in essence, wars regularly lead to never-ending cycles of further and further damage, harm, and death. Hence, one should at least think in terms of a merchant and accept rather a small loss than to dive into a war that can only bring about much greater losses (224).

Perhaps surprisingly, but still logically and convincingly, Erasmus promotes the idea of avoiding war even when the cause and reason for it might be just. Drawing on a short narrative of two cousins who went to court against each other over a certain amount of money and agreed just in the nick of time to dismiss the trial and compromised with each other, he argues that even a just war would cause so much more damage, hurt, costs, and harm than an unjust peace (226). It would be preferable to concede in a certain matter than to win a just war with many costs and lives (226).

Unfortunately, if we consider one more time the situation of Ukraine being attacked by Russia since February 24, 2022, this advice could not be followed easily, if at all. While writing this essay, there were no signs of any willingness on either side of that conflict to negotiate an end to the war. The Ukrainians want to defend their own country, and the Russians want to occupy it. Under such circumstances, a compromise is not possible, just as the Western Allies could not achieve any peace with Hitler Germany during World War II. In both cases, the loss of people and the harm caused by the Nazis' continued military operation against the enemy forces or by the Russians in the case of Ukraine would by far exceed any gains that a lame peace would achieve.

Erasmus went so far as to object to the Christian wars against the Ottomans (227–28), blaming the former for their arrogance and provocations, as if the Turks did not pursue a highly aggressive war of colonization and occupation throughout the entire period from the middle of the fourteenth to the seventeenth century. The author would prefer peaceful missionary activities that would contain or block, as he naively believes, the imperialist interests of the Ottomans. Instead, the Christians resort to evil actions to fight an evil force, as if the Turks were, as he believes, members of the same family. If one would remove the name and the sign of the cross, then the Christians would be Turks fighting against Turks (228). On the other hand, Erasmus holds on the high ground in his argument when he accuses the Christians of committing murder when they kill the Turks on the battlefield (228). But he speaks from an abstract and very religious position and does not take into consideration the concrete military situation on the ground, forcing the various generals or rulers to pursue specific strategies to defend themselves. Erasmus goes so far as to suggest that Christians should not resort to weapons in self-defense but should rely on the words in the Gospels. Even when the Muslims would not convert to Christianity,

⁷ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Christian-gun-control-Bible.html> or <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/october-web-only/guns-christians-self-defense-mass-shootings-protection.html>

then the Christians should pray that this will happen in the future (229).

The same would apply to the people in Asia and Africa, where many already believe in the Christian faith or lean toward it. However, in most cases, those who preach Christianity in those countries aim only toward robbing the local riches and thus to gain much wealth out of sheer greed (230). Erasmus is particularly peeved about all those Christians who pretend to follow their faith when they embark on military campaigns against the Turks, for instance, but in reality, do not care about the Christian teaching and only try to gain material riches (230). Thereupon, the author then formulates the monumental statement that it is a lesser evil to be an honest Turk or Jew than a hypocritical Christian (231). And further: “I prefer a true Turk over a fake Christian” (231). If all Christians formed one harmonious community and avoided internecine strife, the external foes would hesitate considerably attacking them. Model behavior in ethical and moral terms would represent an impressive example and might convince those of other faiths more easily to listen to the Christian teachings.

Erasmus even turns sarcastic when he reflects on the popular strategy to stoke fear of the Turks among the public only in order to justify military operations and hence taxation to pay for them. He specifically identifies those rulers who proceed in that way as tyrants and warns seriously about the danger of war propaganda which hides the true intentions—to repress their own people and to crush their spirit (232 and 233) [(48, 49), 63–80; (50)]. However, Erasmus hastens to comment that he would not be opposed at all to fighting against the Turks if or when they might attack Western Europe, but only as long as that defensive war would be waged in a Christian spirit and attitude (232). If the Christians would then demonstrate a model behavior, they would be able to communicate, even without words, with the enemy and possibly convince him to abstain from further violence. People would be able to achieve a compromise in a few fundamental aspects, and a new community across the religious divide would hence enjoy strong stability, especially because then everyone could express his/her opinion openly and freely (232) [(51), 225–36].

Returning to the title of his treatise, Erasmus laments that most wars waged by Christians had been initiated by theologians and lawyers—hence also their kings—if not by bishops. The young and inexperienced people would be easily deceived to consider war a glorious experience when, in reality, it always turned out to be horrible, deadly, catastrophic, and brutal (233). The motivations to launch a war would be highly diverse, but it would always be a secret hatred, ambition, or a brutal, mean-spirited attitude (233), if not the simple desire for absolute power over all people, to rule as dictators or tyrants (233). It would be simply miserable if a ruler would have to appeal to criminals, barbarians, and murderers for help to wage a war (234).

On a side note, this seems to be exactly the case with the so-called Yevgeny Viktorovich Prigozhin’s “Wagner Group” that is fighting on behalf of President Putin against the Ukrainians, widely speculated to be a neo-Nazi military group supporting the Russians’ interest in many parts of the world with utmost violence and brutality (currently in danger of being dissolved after their mutiny against Putin; see, both last accessed on 18 July, 2023)⁸.

Erasmus truly puts the finger into the wound, identifying here the concrete situation with a dictatorial leader who can no longer rely on the support of his own people and hence resorts to bandits, convicts, and armed rogues (234). Those who then still support the ruler would follow the idea that it would be worth to avenge even only a small insult with a military operation, and this at huge costs for all people and the entire country (235), certainly an absurd concept but highly effective in terms of war psychology because allegedly higher ideals would be realized on behalf of a charismatic leader [(52); it almost seems as if Koenigsberg was an avatar of Erasmus of Rotterdam in his psychological analysis of war mentality]. Tragically, Erasmus’s questions regarding the wasting of the entire generation of young men in the war sound almost prophetic, especially in light of the outcome of World War I and World War II, though the various wars at his time were not much better at all considering the massive numbers of victims already then.

With deep sorrow, the author finally admits that there are, indeed, wars that cannot be avoided because too many people are filled with evilness, but those in charge should then at least attempt to reduce the amount of blood-shedding, and the warring Christians ought to pursue a true Christian life and fight only in self-defense against evilness (237). However, those who would truly pursue Christian ideals would never face a real need to wage a war because all possible causes would then have to be considered idle and irrelevant (238).

The criticism of war thus finally translates into a criticism of those who only pretend to be Christians but do not really embrace the Christian ideals, which consist of love and peace (238). Those who are devout in their faith could not betray it and accept the necessity to fight with weapons against other people. Honest Christians would be those who would demonstrate their spirituality through acts and deeds, and not only through words (238). Hence, all princes, the popes, and the various governments ought to aim for nothing but peace. Erasmus ultimately appeals to his audience to recognize the fundamental longing for peace which can be found in all people, although many have become blind and do not know themselves or Christ any longer. All Christians ought to pursue only peace since they all form together the one Christian community which should resist war in any possible manner.

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wagner_Group or <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state>

Major Church leaders, such as Pope Julius II (r. 1503–1513), famous for his strong involvement in the Italian Wars (1494–1559), the reconstruction of the St. Peter's Basilica, the divvying up of the New World between Spain and Portugal in the treatise of Tordesillas (1494), and his employment or patronage of the major Renaissance artists Raphael and Michelangelo [(53, 54); accessed 18 July, 2023]⁹, might have gained a huge reputation, as Erasmus was willing to concede, but, throughout his rule, he was responsible for the death of many people (240). Already in 1514, Erasmus had composed a satirical dialog aimed against the pope, *Iulius exclusus e coelis* ((55), 50–51]. This text is also included in (30), 99–140. For our author, the next pope, Leo X (1513–1521), turned the other way and strongly promoted peace, as a leader of the Holy See was really expected to do.

Conclusion

There would be much more to say about the concept of peace as advocated by Erasmus of Rotterdam as he was not only a prolific author but also a staunch critic of many shortcomings of his time. However, he was not at all the only strong voice promoting peace and rejecting war in his time or the following centuries. The German poets of the Baroque period, those who had witnessed the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), above all, such as Andreas Gryphius (1616–1664), formulated strikingly similar ideas and resorted to similar images in their sonnets and epigrams (56).

Erasmus, however, emerges as a most powerful and insightful writer with a strong anti-war sentiment. In many respects, we recognize here a highly intellectual and logical, as well as a compassionate thinker who sharply penetrated the false concepts of war and the hypocrisy of those Christians who enthusiastically promoted war, especially against the Ottomans. Erasmus's critique proves to be also directed against false or weak Christians and all those who clamor for war without understanding or revealing the true consequences of such a horrible operation, in which there can be, at the end, really only losers and no real winners because war only destroys humanity.

Of course, today, in light of the situation in Ukraine or other parts of the world embattled in war activities today, we might have to accept slightly different perspectives, especially considering the imbalance between both countries, the lack of any provocation by the Ukrainians, and the open hostility of the Russians driven by the obsessive ideology of Russian nationhood which seems to pursue the goal to incorporate Ukraine with all means available. Erasmus could not foresee that war, of course, but his critical comments on war at large and at his time specifically can serve us well for further explorations of the true evils of war and the absolute need for peace so that humanity can prosper again.

Only a few times does Erasmus admit to some degree the necessity of self-defense, hence of a just war, but in most cases, he recognizes vices as the ultimate reasons for wars to break out. Without judging the situation in Ukraine further, we can certainly accept many of the conclusions drawn by Erasmus and disseminate them once again as his insights have much to tell us even today. Tragically, of course, the major concerns addressed by Erasmus have not dissipated; in essence, every war party in the world—and there are really many until today—ought to pay attention to the ideas developed by this famous Humanist, but it is highly unlikely that leaders such as Putin or Kim Jong Il (North Korea) will follow this advice.

However, we as scholars are tasked with unearthing the pearls of wisdom formulated by major writers such as Erasmus for the new generation and making them available again through a critical reading of those pre-modern documents, as I have done here (57). If medieval and early modern history has any meaning or relevance for us today, then the case of Erasmus proves the claim most powerfully. Indeed, nothing of his observations regarding war and peace has lost in importance for us in the twenty-first century, and we would be well advised if we listened more carefully to what he had to say about this highly thorny issue, the bane of all humanity.

This does not mean at all that we would have to tolerate or condone aggressive wars such as the one waged by the Ottomans against the Christian Europeans or by Russia against Ukraine. Similarly, the Western Allies had no choice but to fight against Hitler Germany during World War II to save the world from absolute evil, as expressed by the Holocaust. However, Erasmus was not an absolute advocate for peace. Instead, we can identify him primarily as a critic of wars when they are launched for selfish, greedy, arrogant, or other evil reasons, such as to gain profits, conquer new territories, and establish more power.

In a way, we could recognize in this early modern Humanist a “psychologist” of war and peace long *avant la lettre*, a deeply concerned commentator of the horrendous consequences of any military operations, and a defender of humanity against individuals determined by vices that threaten the destruction of our society and the entire world. In most cases, as Erasmus recognized, individual rulers or kings were responsible for wars that consistently prove to be entirely foolish, unnecessary, and plainly wrong. Quite understandably, Erasmus particularly targeted Christians who promoted war for whatever reason, either the Crusades or the war against the Ottomans. For him, most of those would have to be condemned as hypocrites and liars who falsely claimed to be true believers but were only using religious arguments as a pretext for their own agenda. Undoubtedly, here we face a major intellectual from the early sixteenth century who had profound comments to make about both war and peace. Those certainly deserve to be

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Julius_II

considered closely also today, depending, of course, on the specific circumstances.

Tragically, war is not going away; the military-industrial complex is too strong for that to happen any time soon, and human nature does not seem to be inclined to peaceful co-existence. Nevertheless, Erasmus's comments still deserve to be brought back to our awareness today because he offered poignant observations about the general hypocrisy of those who promote war, wage war, or argue for military operations to achieve political goals. All this, however, does not allow us simply to lay down all weapons and to accept the military aggression of the other side in order to "maintain" peace at all costs. It would be an interesting and valuable perspective if Erasmus could be asked today what he would have to say about the war in Ukraine and the Western support against Russia.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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